

道

CHAPTER V

T A O I S M

There is a being, wonderful, perfect;

It existed before heaven and earth.

How quiet it is!

How spiritual it is!

It stands alone and it does not change.

It moves around and around,

but does not on this account suffer.

All life comes from it.

It wraps everything with its love as in a garment,

and yet it claims no honor, for it does not demand to be Lord.

I do not know its name, and so I call it Tao, the Way,

and I rejoice in its power."



*Above: Bronze mirror decorated with taoist images. Left:
Lonely Eminence Hill dominates the city of Guilin in the
south of China*



THE OLD MASTER

NO CIVILIZATION IS monochrome. In China the classical tones of Confucianism have been balanced not only by the spiritual shades of Buddhism but by the romantic hues of Taoism.

According to tradition, Taoism (pronounced Dowism) originated with a man named Lao Tzu who is said to have been born about 604 B.C. We know nothing for certain about him; all we have is a mosaic of legends. Some of these are fantastic, while others seem quite plausible: that he kept the archives in his native western state and lived a simple and unassertive life. The only purportedly contemporary portrait tells of Confucius who, hearing reports of the strange man, sought him out. He was impressed by Lao Tzu, we are told, and likened him to a dragon — enigmatic, larger than life, and mysterious.

The traditional portrait concludes with the report that Lao Tzu, saddened by his people's disinclination to cultivate the natural goodness he advocated and seeking greater personal solitude for his closing years, climbed on a water buffalo and rode westward towards what is now Tibet. At the Hankao Pass a gatekeeper tried to persuade him to turn back. Failing this,



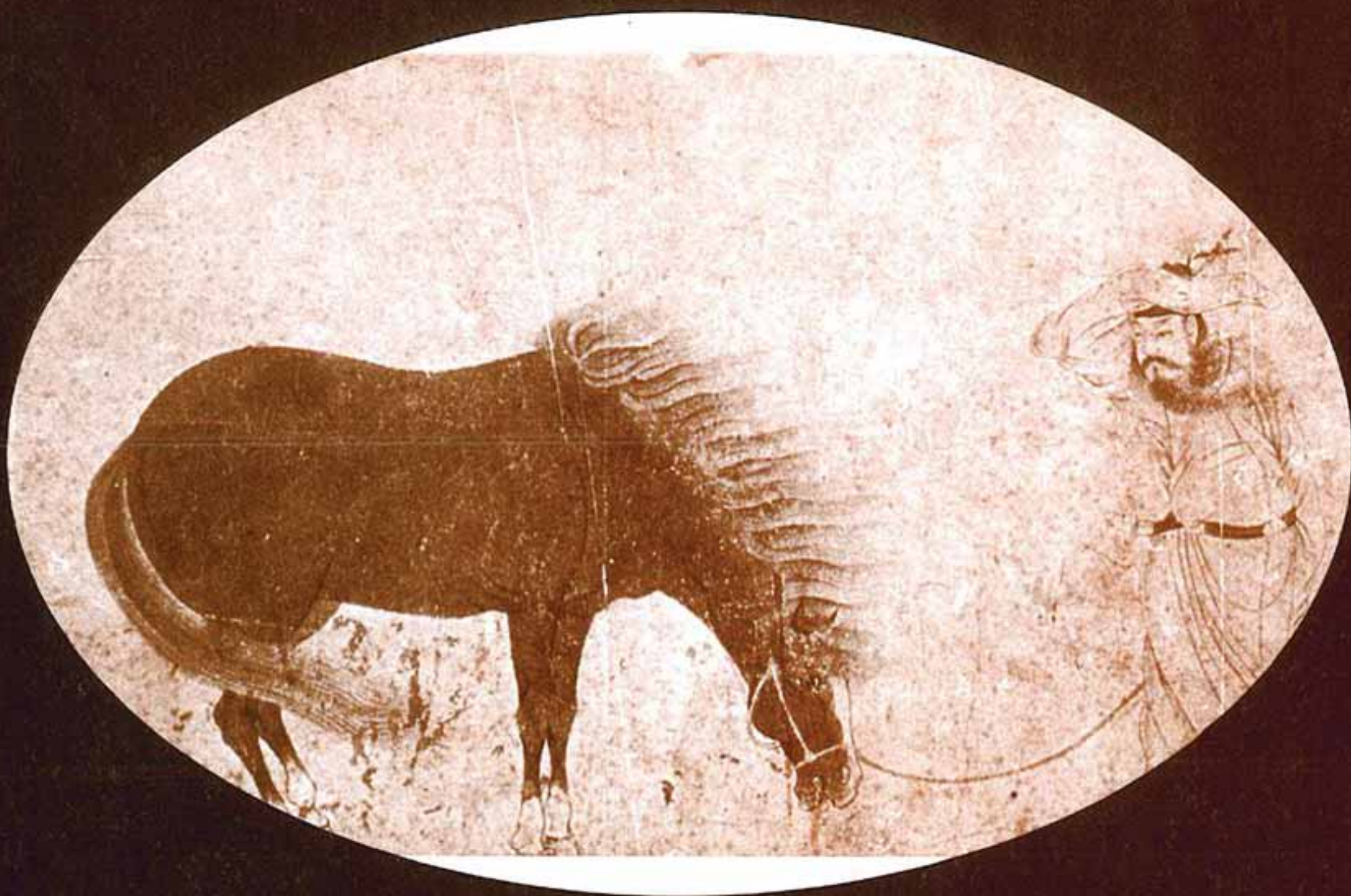
he asked if Lao Tzu would not at least leave a record of his beliefs to the civilization he was abandoning. This Lao Tzu consented to do. He retired for three days and returned with a slim volume of 5000 characters titled *Tao Te Ching*, or *The Way and Its Power*. A testament to humanity's at-home-ness in the universe, it can be read in half an hour or a lifetime. It remains to this day the basic text of Taoist thought.

Whether this final account is fact or fiction, it is so true to Taoist attitudes that it will remain a part of Taoism forever. Scholars do not see the *Tao Te Ching* as having been written by a single hand, and doubt that it attained the form in which we have it until the second half of the third century B.C. They concede, however, that its ideas cohere to the point where we must posit the existence of someone under whose influence the book took shape, and they have no objection to our calling that someone Lao Tzu.

Above: The ox-herding pictures used as running illustrations in this chapter, although now known in their Buddhist versions, were originally Taoist. Center: Landscape painting by artist Wen Cheng-ming. Opposite: Horse and rider, by Chao Meng-fu.



TAOISM





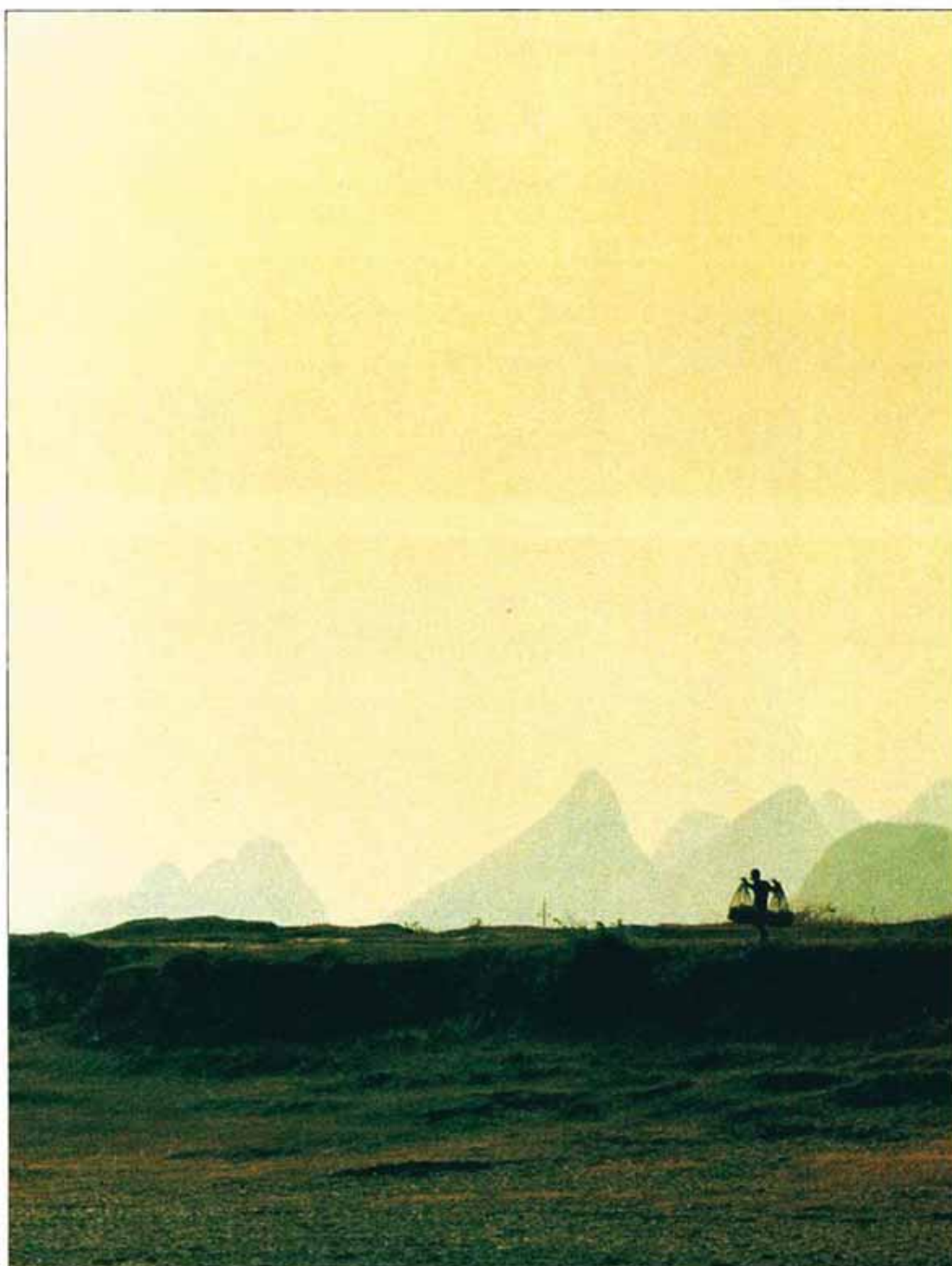
THREE MEANINGS OF TAO

ON opening Taoism's bible, the *Tao Te Ching*, we sense at once that everything revolves around the pivotal concept of *Tao* itself. Literally this word means path, or way. There are three senses, however, in which this "way" can be understood.

First, *Tao* is the *way of ultimate reality*. This *Tao* cannot be perceived or even clearly conceived, for it is too vast for reason to fathom. It is, all the same, the ground of everything that follows. Above all, behind all, beneath all is the Womb from which all life springs and to which it returns.

Though the *Tao* is ultimately transcendent, it is also immanent. In this second sense it is the *way of the universe*; the norm, the rhythm, and the driving power in all nature. Basically spirit rather than matter, it cannot be exhausted, for the more it is drawn upon, the more it flows. There are marks of inevitability about it, for when autumn comes "no leaf is spared because of its beauty, no flower because of its fragrance." Yet ultimately it is benign. Giving life to all things, it may be called "the Mother of the World."

In its third sense, *Tao* refers to the *way of human life* when it meshes with the *Tao* of the universe as just described. Most of what follows in this chapter will detail what the Taoists suggest that this way of life is. First, however, it is necessary to point out that there have been in China not one but three Taoisms.





THREE APPROACHES TO POWER & THE TAOISMS THAT FOLLOW

*T*AO TE CHING, the title of Taoism's basic text, has been translated *The Way and Its Power*. We have seen that the first of these substantive terms, the Way, can be taken in three senses. We must now add that this is also true of the second substantive term, power. Corresponding to the three ways *te* or power can be approached, there have arisen in China three species of Taoism so dissimilar that initially they seem to have no more in common than homonyms like *blew/blue* or *sun/son* that sound alike but have different meanings. We shall find that this is not the case, but first the three species must be identified. Two have standard designations, Philosophical Taoism and Religious or Popular Taoism. The third school (which will come second in our order of presentation) is too heterogeneous to have acquired a single designation. Its population does, however, constitute an identifiable cluster by virtue of sharing a common objective. All were engaged in vitalizing programs that were intended to facilitate the power of the *Tao*, its *te*, as it flows through human beings.

Scenes like this have inspired Chinese painters for centuries.



EFFICIENT POWER: PHILOSOPHICAL TAOISM



UNLIKE RELIGIOUS TAOISM which became a full-fledged church, Philosophical Taoism and the “vitalizing Taoisms” (as we shall refer to the second group) are relatively unorganized. Philosophical Taoism is reflective and the vitalizing programs active, but neither was institutionalized. They share a second similarity in that both are self-help programs. There are teachers, but they are better regarded as coaches who train their students – philosophical teachers in what students should understand, vitalizing teachers in what they should do. In contrast to religious Taoists, those in these first two camps work primarily on themselves.

Turning to what divides the first two schools, it has to do with their respective stances toward the *Tao*’s power on which life feeds. Philosophical Taoists try to conserve their *te* by expending it efficiently, whereas the vitalizing Taoists try to increase its available supply.

Because philosophical Taoism is essentially an attitude toward life, it is the one that has most to say to the world at large, so will receive the longest treatment. Not until the second half of this chapter, however. Here we shall only identify it to place it in its logical position before proceeding with its two sister Taoisms.

Called School Taoism in China, philosophical Taoism is associated with the names of Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, and the *Tao Te Ching*. We can establish its link with power by remembering that philosophy seeks knowledge and that knowledge is power, as Bacon asserted. The knowledge the Taoists sought was the kind that empowers life. We call it wisdom, and to live wisely (the Taoist philosophers argued) is to live in a way that conserves life’s vitality by not expending it in useless, draining



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ways, the chief of which are friction and conflict. In the second half of this chapter we shall examine Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu's prescriptions for avoiding such dissipations, but we can anticipate a single point here. Their recommendations revolve around the concept of *wu wei*, a phrase that translates literally as inaction but in Taoism means pure effectiveness. Action in the mode of *wu wei* is action in which friction – in interpersonal relationships,

in intrapsychic conflict, and in relation to nature – is reduced to the minimum.

We turn now to the vitalizing cults as our second species of Taoism.

Opposite: Teenage girl in a commune outside Shanghai practicing Taoist exercises. Above: Kindergarten children in Shanghai.



AUGMENTED POWER: TAOIST HYGIENE & YOGA

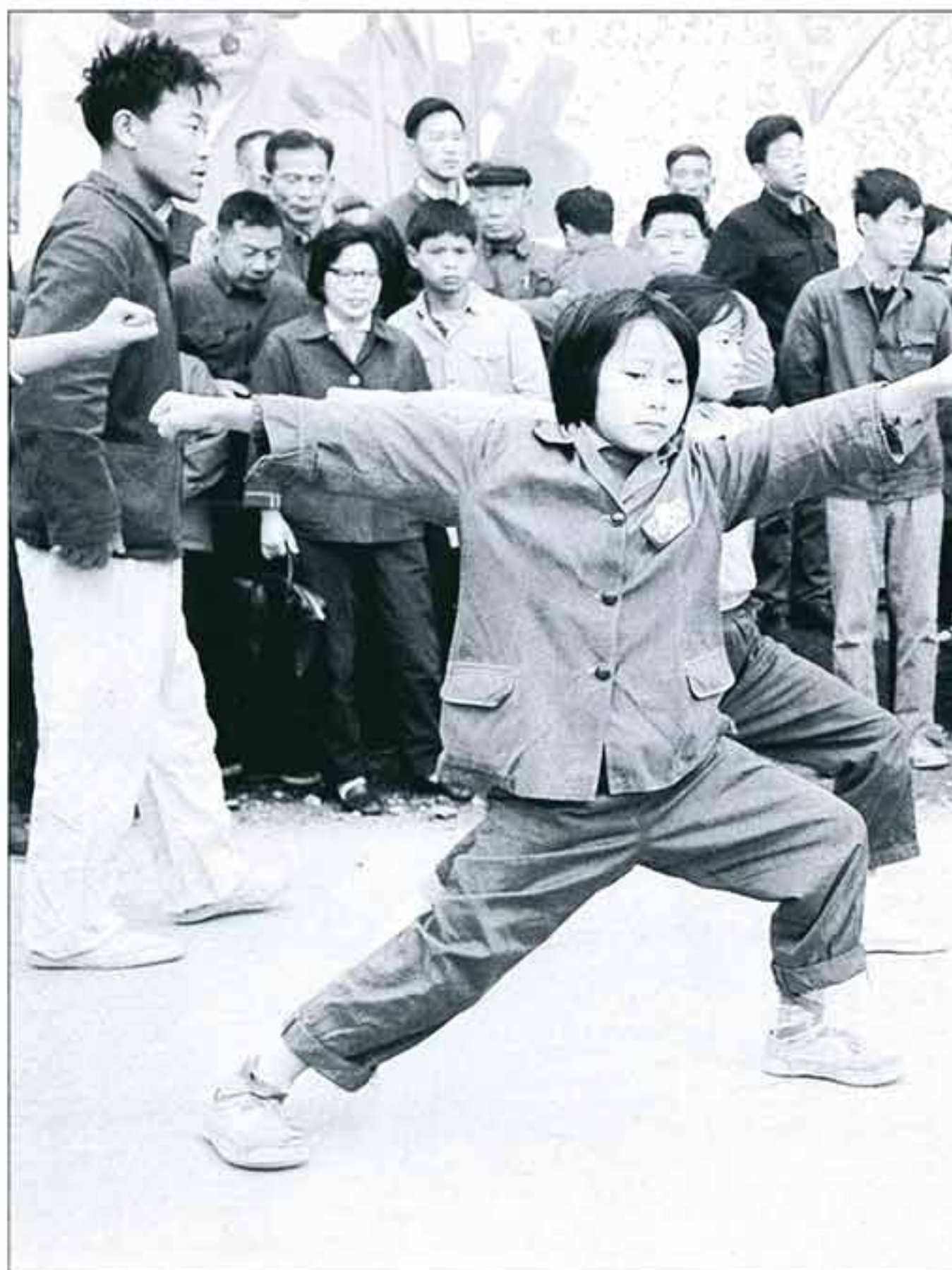
*T*AOIST ADEPTS, AS WE SHALL CALL the practitioners of this second kind of Taoism because all were engaged in training programs of some sort, were not willing to settle for the philosophers' goal of managing their allotments of the Tao efficiently. They wanted to go beyond conservation to increase; specifically, to increase the allotments of Tao that were at their disposal.

The word *ch'i* provides the proper entrance to this second school, for though it literally means breath, it actually means vital energy. The Taoists used it to refer to the power of the Tao that they experienced coursing through them – or not coursing because it was blocked. Their main object was to remove the obstacles that reduced its flow. *Ch'i* fascinated these Taoists. Blake registered their feelings precisely when he exclaimed, "*energy is delight!*" for energy is the life force and the Taoists loved life. To be alive is good; to be more alive is better; to be always alive is best. Hence Taoist immortality cults.

To accomplish their end of maximizing *ch'i*, these Taoists worked with three things: matter, movement, and their minds.

Respecting *matter*, they tried eating things – seemingly everything – to see if *ch'i* could be ingested nutritionally. This produced a remarkable pharmacopia of medicinal herbs, but the Taoists didn't stop there. They went on to seek an elixir of physical immortality. Sexual experiments were performed wherein semen was retained so *ch'i* wouldn't be spent, and breathing exercises were devised to absorb *ch'i* from the atmosphere.

These efforts to extract *ch'i* from matter in its solid, liquid, and gaseous forms were supplemented by programs of bodily *movement* such as *t'ai-chi chuan* to invite *ch'i* from the cosmos and remove blocks to its internal



flow. This last was the object of acupuncture as well.

Turning finally to the *mind*, contemplatives developed Taoist meditation. This third way of increasing *ch'i* is the most subtle, so it requires the longest treatment.

Animating meditational or yogic Taoism was a dawning fascination with the inner as opposed to the outer self. Early peoples did not distinguish these two sides of their being appreciably. Meditational Taoism arose as the advancing self-consciousness of the Chinese brought sub-



jective experience to full view. Novel and momentous, this world of the inner self invited exploration. Pioneers found it so interesting that matter suffered by comparison, being but shell and overlay. To be directly in view of the source of one's awareness was a momentous experience, for one then saw "the self as it was meant to be." One saw not merely "things perceived," but "that by which we perceive."

It was to reach this pure perception that Taoist *yogis*

meditated. The physical postures and concentration techniques that they employed had much in common with India's *raja yoga*, but the Chinese gave the project a characteristic twist. Their social preoccupation led them to press the possibility that the *ch'i* that poured into *yogis* when their minds were emptied of self-seeking, perturbing emotions and distracting thoughts could be transmitted psychically to the community to enhance its vitality and harmonize its affairs. The power that could be thus acquired and redirected was remarkable; indeed, it "could shift Heaven and Earth." For in the condition of total quiescence and stillness, the heartmind was open as never before to the Tao. "To the mind that is still, the whole universe surrenders." Without lifting a finger, a ruler who had mastered this stillness could order an entire people with his mystical-moral power. Without being aware of what was happening, his subjects would spontaneously forego unruly ways. "The sage relies on actionless activity. The myriad creatures are worked upon by him. He puts himself in the background, but is always there."

The *yogis* knew they could not hope for much public understanding. Confucians ridiculed their direct, psychic approach to social harmony, likening it to impatient farmers who tug gently on their crops each night, hoping to speed their growth. Even someone who should have understood, the Taoist mystic Chuang Tzu, burlesqued their breathing exercises. "They expel the used air with great energy to inhale more deeply the fresh air. Like bears, they climb trees in order to breathe with greater ease." But despite such ridicule, *Taoist yoga* had an appreciable following. Some sinologists consider it the basic perspective from which the *Tao Te Ching* was written. If they are right, it testifies to the veiled language of the book, for it is usually read in the philosophical way we shall soon come to. Before we turn to that way, however, we must introduce the third major branch of Taoism which is religious.

Younger children in today's China practice more vigorous techniques, while the older generation begins its day with t'ai chi.



VICARIOUS POWER: RELIGIOUS TAOISM



PHILOSOPHICAL TAOISM sought to manage life's normal quotient of the *Tao* efficiently, and energizing Taoism sought to raise that quotient, but something was lacking. Reflection and health programs require time, and most Chinese lacked that commodity. Yet they too needed help; there were epidemics to be checked, marauding ghosts to be reckoned with, and rains that needed to be induced or stopped. Taoists responded to such problems. The measures they devised paralleled many of the freelance doings of psychics, shamans, faith healers, and soothsayers, who came by their powers naturally; but Taoism institutionalized those activities by founding, in the second century A.D., a

church. Its pantheon consists of Lao Tzu and two other deities, and the texts that were said to issue from them came to be accepted without question. The line of succession in this church continues down to the present in Taiwan.

Much of religious Taoism looks like crude superstition, but we must remember that we have little idea what energy is, how it proceeds, or the means by which (and extent to which) it can be augmented. In any case, the intent of the Taoist church is clear. As one historian puts it, "The Taoist priesthood made cosmic life-power available for ordinary villagers."

The texts they used are crammed with descriptions of rituals which, if exactly performed, have magical



effects, and the word magic holds the key to this priestly version of Taoism. The word has come to connote trickery and illusion, but traditionally it was everywhere respected as the means by which higher, occult powers are tapped for use in the visible world. Peter's healing of Aeneas (as reported in Acts 9:32-34) provides us with a Western instance.

Now as Peter went here and there among all the believers, he came down also to the saints living in Lydia. There he found a man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden for eight years, for he was paralyzed. Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed!" And immediately he got up.

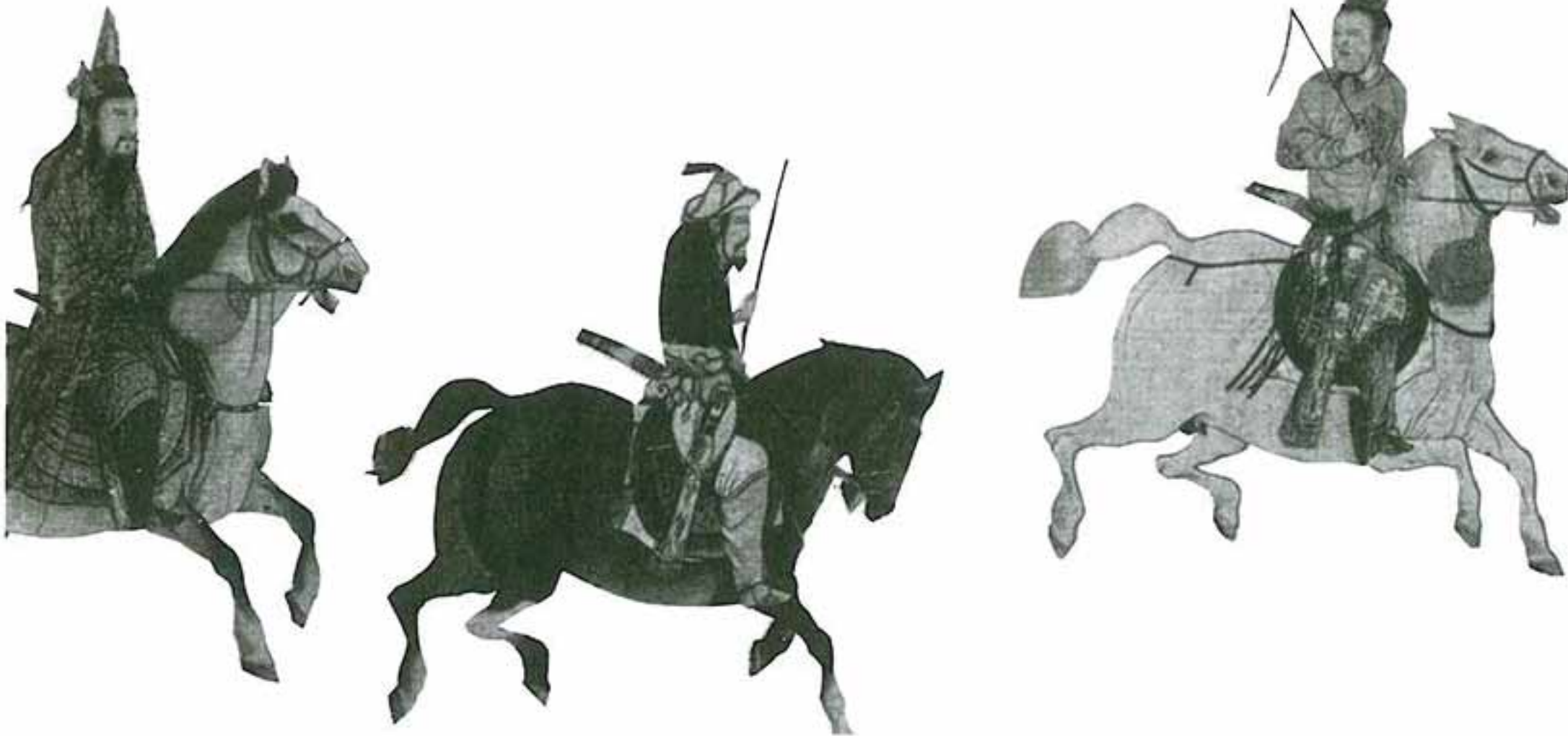
Note that this was not a miracle. It would have been

a miracle if Christ had empowered the paralytic Aeneas to climb out of bed without Peter's help. As it was, Peter played a role in the cure, a necessary role we may assume, and we are confronted with magic. Sacred magic, as it happens, for if a demon had been invoked for malevolent purposes, sorcery would have been at work. It was under the rubric of magic as thus traditionally understood that the Taoist church – dividing the territory with freelance wizards, exorcists, and shamans – devised ways to harness higher powers for humane ends.

Opposite: A Taoist healing ritual. Above: Central altar in the Bao-an Gong Temple.



CONCLUSION



CIRCLING EACH OTHER LIKE YIN AND YANG themselves, Taoism and Confucianism represent the two indigenous poles of the Chinese character. Confucius represents the classical, Lao Tzu the romantic. Confucius advocates calculated behavior, Lao Tzu praises spontaneity and naturalness. Confucius' focus is on the human; Lao Tzu connects the human to what transcends it. As the Chinese themselves say, Confucius roams within society, Lao Tzu wanders beyond. Something in life reaches out in each of these directions, and Chinese civilization would have been poorer if either had not appeared.

There are books whose first reading casts a spell that is never quite undone, the reason being that they speak to the deepest "me" in the reader. For all who quicken at the thought that always, everywhere, the *Tao* is within us, the *Tao Te Ching* is such a book. Though never prac-

ticed to perfection, its lessons of simplicity, openness, and wisdom have been for millions of Chinese a joyful guide.

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It existed before heaven and earth.

How quiet it is!

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It stands alone and it does not change.

*It moves around and around, but does not
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it claims no honor, for it does not demand to be Lord.*

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